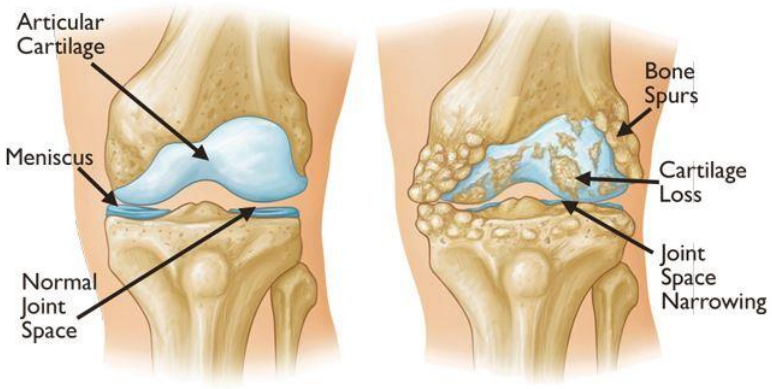
LexiMed
Medicolegal Specialists

Degenerative Joint Disease



Degenerative joint disease is characterised by a group of mechanical abnormalities involving degradation of joints, including the cartilage which is a slippery tissue between the ends of bones in joints, and subchondral bone which provides support for the cartilage at the articular surface.

Symptoms may include joint or muscle pain, tenderness, stiffness, locking, and sometimes an effusion, which is a build up of joint fluid. When bone surfaces become less well protected by cartilage, bone may be exposed and damaged. Bony spurs or extra bone may form around the joint. As a result of decreased movement secondary to pain, regional muscles may atrophy, and ligaments may become more lax.

Causes

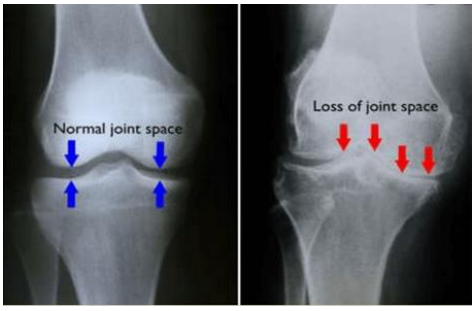
The cause of degenerative joint disease is wear and tear of the joint. This occurs due to a number of factors as outlined in the table below.

Trauma	Fractures and other joint injuries can cause degenerative joint disease. The joint may become misaligned, or injured directly. Injury to supporting ligaments can also cause damage to a joint over time resulting in degenerative joint disease.
Congenital Factors	It has been found that degenerative joint disease can be hereditary with people being more predisposed if it runs in the family.
Long Term Overuse	Repetitive joint movements, particularly with additional weight, over time in the workplace or during sports can give rise to degenerative joint disease.
Medical Conditions	Some medical conditions can cause degenerative joint disease for example, haemophilia can cause bleeding directly into the joints while other disorders such as avascular necrosis can cut off the blood supply to a joint.

The x-rays on the right show both a normal and a degenerative knee joint.

Treatment

There are a number of treatments available. The causal factor and severity of the degenerative joint disease, as well as the overall health and age of the patient, determines what course of treatment a specialist will choose.



Normal knee joint (left) and arthritic knee joint (right)

Physical Therapy	Physiotherapy has been known to significantly reduce pain and increase function of an affected joint, as well as build up supporting structures, muscles and ligaments.
Lifestyle Modification	Most patients suffering from degenerative joint disease are usually advised to engage in muscle strengthening exercises as part of a daily routine, to ensure constant extra support for the damaged joint. For overweight people this will include a weight loss regime to decrease the load on weight bearing joints.
Medication	Analgesics such as paracetamol are usually prescribed for pain management. Non steroidal anti-inflammatories are also prescribed for more severe cases. Injections into the joint, such as hydrocortisone can also provide temporary relief of symptoms.
Surgery	Surgery is only considered when more conservative options have been tried and have failed. Joint replacement surgery or resurfacing are the surgical options available.

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